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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 002284

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SUBJECT: GAZAN CROSSINGS, PERMITS, AND ACCESS ISSUES:

IMPROVEMENTS MADE, CONCERNS REMAIN

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Gene A. Cretz for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (C) Summary: Since the February 8 Sharm el Sheikh summit between PA President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli PM Ariel Sharon, the GOI has made several improvements in the Gazan crossings regime, and the IDF has increased its willingness to coordinate with the international community and the TFPI on issues of permits and humanitarian access. On the crossings, improvements include a dramatic increase in the number of Gazan laborers and businesspeople crossing daily through the Erez terminal and the partial re-opening of the Erez Industrial Zone. On humanitarian access to the Gaza Strip, the international Task Force on Project Implementation (TFPI) reports unprecedented IDF cooperation, including allowing the TFPI to work directly with IDF brigade and field commanders. In addition, COGAT has increased its responsiveness on Embassy permit requests following the Ambassador's February 22 meeting with General Mishlev. Despite these changes, only a relatively small number of Gazan businessmen report that they have benefited, and most Gazans on the ground note little positive impact on their daily lives. Contacts continue to complain of significant delays at Karni terminal, and have expressed dismay over a reportedly medical grade x-ray the IDF has installed at Rafah crossing. Additionally, Post remains concerned about the potential humanitarian and economic impact of a full IDF closure of the Gaza Strip in preparation for and during Israel's planned summer evacuation of Gaza settlers. Such a shutdown may prevent some 60 USAID and PD grantees from traveling to the U.S. for summer programs. End Summary.

GOI Improves Crossings...

2. (SBU) Several changes in the Gazan crossings regime have occurred since the February 8 Sharm el Sheikh summit between PA President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli PM Ariel Sharon. Improvements have included removal of the restriction on males age 16-35 exiting Gaza via Rafah Terminal, the partial re-opening of the Erez Industrial Zone, an increase in the number of laborer and merchant permits issued to Gazans, and an easing of internal restrictions on movement at the Abu Kholi checkpoint. On permits and external border crossings, GOI sources report an increase since March 13 in the number of laborer permits issued to 5,600 to 1,100. In conjunction with this, UNRWA reported an average of 3,500 laborers crossing through Erez into Israel the week of April 3, with over 4,000 laborers crossing April 9. These numbers reflect a dramatic increase from the 200-300 laborers crossing daily prior to February. Several Gazan private sector contacts concur with reports of operational improvements at Erez, saying that their average transit time at the crossing has lately been reduced from hours to 15-20 minutes. Similarly, OCHA has cited "a sustained increase in the number of workers" entering the Erez Industrial Zone since its February 13 re-opening, with numbers now topping 600 on a daily basis. (Note: The Erez Industrial Zone employed over 3,500 Gazans daily prior to its June 2004 closure. End note.) On internal closures, Gazan contacts also report positively on the 24-hour-a-day opening of Abu Kholi checkpoint to private vehicles, albeit those carrying at least three passengers.

...But Average Gazans Unaffected and Unimpressed

3. (C) Despite these improvements, contacts in Gaza and in international organizations are quick to point out that the GOI has not yet implemented the full scope of crossing improvements needed for real economic growth and humanitarian relief in the Strip. According to Bank of Palestine Vice Chairman Dr. Hani Shawa, "only the elite benefit from changed procedures at the crossings; the average Gazan is still humiliated and restricted." Palestinian human rights organizations report that while the number of laborers crossing through Erez into Israel has increased, security procedures for this category of permit holders remain lengthy and strict. On an April 3 visit to the terminal, Econoff observed no movement over the course of more than one hour for 20 laborers and humanitarian/medical cases attempting to return to Gaza. Additionally, the same private sector contacts who cite shorter crossing times at Erez note that

seemingly random changes in IDF procedures have caused sporadic delays. "On Monday we crossed in 15 minutes," 7-UP CEO Mohammed Yazgi told Econoff April 3. "On Tuesday, we stood in the sun waiting for a metal door to open for three hours, and then we gave up and went home."

14. (C) On Karni terminal, the Gaza Strip's only passage for the import and export of goods, manufacturers and agribusinesses dependent on raw materials and access to outside markets charge that there has been no improvement in procedures. Israeli shipping and marketing firms confirm that containers moving in or out of the Strip continue to wait at Karni for 20-30 days. (Note: According to Karni general manager Yoni Doton, closures and delays are often precipitated by what he terms credible security threats. These types of short-term closures have reportedly increased since the December terrorist bombing that killed six Israeli terminal employees. End note.) Finally, UNRWA, OCHA, and Gazan private sector contacts have raised significant concerns regarding a reportedly medical-grade x-ray machine the IDF is using to scan travelers -- including pregnant women and the ill -- exiting the Gaza Strip at Rafah terminal. Contacts say that the machine causes delays due to the need for its operator to move behind a leaded curtain during use. IDF sources told the Embassy April 2 that the machine is a thermal sensor and produces no harmful radiation. Nevertheless, PA Minister for Civil Affairs Muhammed Dahlan reportedly secured the GOI's promise to strictly limit the use of this machine, although it remains on site at the terminal.

Increased COGAT and IDF Responsiveness,
But What About Lockdown?

15. (C) The multi-donor Task Force on Project Implementation has cited unprecedented willingness on the part of senior IDF staff in recent weeks to work with TFPI members on issues of humanitarian and international access to Gaza. An April 6 meeting of TFPI members with Gaza Division Commander Brigadier General Kohavi constituted the achievement of a longstanding TFPI priority to secure for itself direct access to brigade and division commanders. Kohavi told the TFPI that "security is for Israel above all, but we recognize now that it is not all." He suggested that he meet with TFPI members once a month, and ordered his assistants to work with COGAT staff on "creative solutions" to the TFPI's "minimum requirements" document that addresses issues of cargo. In a similarly forward-leaning gesture, COGAT head Major General Mishlev assured the Ambassador February 22 that COGAT will improve its responsiveness on Embassy permit requests. LtC. Daniel Beaudoin, head of COGAT's International Relations division, and Maj. Uri Singer of the Erez Liaison Office, met with an Embassy team headed by EconCouns April 7 for the first in a planned series of joint coordination sessions. Singer emphasized the importance of several recent operational changes at the Erez terminal, including the opening of five passenger lanes, which he said allows merchants, VIP permit holders, laborers and humanitarian cases to cross at the same time. Emboffs have observed that in several recent instances, this increased capacity has enabled Singer to coordinate expedited passage for groups of Embassy contacts with valid permits on one day's notice. Beaudoin and Singer agreed to accept a comprehensive weekly list of pending Embassy permit requests, which they said will ensure greater COGAT responsiveness and quicker turnaround.

16. (C) Both COGAT and the IDF brigade and division commanders are not yet able to provide key details, however, on the GOI's planned "lockdown" of the Gaza Strip in the run-up to disengagement, and the effect it may have on freedom of movement for Gazan Palestinians. Israeli media sources and several GOI contacts cite May 1 as the date after which Israeli access to Gaza settlements will be halted. The IDF has emphasized, however, that this restriction will not affect Gazan movement or the flow of goods in and out of the Strip. Despite these assurances, the international community is concerned that the efforts of an estimated 40,000 - 50,000 IDF troops and several thousand additional Israeli National Police forces deployed to Gaza on or around June 1 to carry out the process of settlement evacuation will cause a de facto closure of the Strip for Palestinians as well as Israeli settlers. In addition, COGAT told Emboffs April 9 that regardless of the GOI's efforts not to restrict Gazan movement, the tens of thousands of right-wing activists expected to begin demonstrations close to the Israeli side of the Erez terminal in the run-up to withdrawal may also deter Gazans from exiting the Strip. The Embassy has made clear to the GOI that COGAT and IDF assistance will be required in ensuring ease of travel for some 60 Gazans slated to travel to the U.S. on USAID and Public Diplomacy-sponsored programs between June and October.

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